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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001844

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: MORE ELECTION UNCERTAINTY

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. SUMMARY: During a March 20-21 visit to the far southern provinces of Songkhla and Pattani, poloffs heard that in several districts Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party candidates would not receive the minimum votes needed to take their seats in parliament. Local TRT candidates are keeping a low profile and are distancing themselves politically from Thaksin. Violence directly related to the April 2 election is not expected. However, the overall level of violence remained high following the audacious attack on a local district office and continuing intimidation of local Buddhist residents. END SUMMARY

TRT UNLIKELY TO GET NEEDED 20 PERCENT OF VOTES...NOW WHAT?  
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12. (C) In the run-up to the April 2 election, Thai Rak Thai (TRT) candidates are running unopposed in 36 of 59 southern seats. In these single candidate races the candidate must receive 20 percent of the votes to win. It is likely that in several southern districts the TRT candidates will not meet that standard, potentially blocking the formation of a new government. Chaoyong Maniraksakun, Chairman of the Journalist Association of southern Thailand, was one of several local political observers who pointed out several districts in the far South where the TRT candidates had "no chance" of securing the minimum votes needed to secure the election because of widespread opposition to the Prime Minister.

13. (C) Election rules stipulate that, in cases where the minimum percentage is not reached, run-off elections must be held until a candidate receives 20 percent. Songkhla Election Committee Chairman Chawalit Kalambaheti said there were two Democrat stronghold districts in Songkhla where it was unlikely that the TRT candidates could meet the 20 percent threshold -- no matter how many times the elections were held. The Songkhla Election Committee, facing the possibility of perpetual run-off elections, has boldly decided to ignore the issue and has not made plans to hold a runoff election. "We will wait until we receive instructions from the Central Election Commission," said the Chairman. Pattani Election Commissioner Padoongyot Duangmala has also not established plans to handle a run-off election, despite his expectation that TRT would not be able to win the minimum percentage of votes in two of the provinces constituencies.

OPPOSITION TACTICS  
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14. (C) The Democrats, who have long dominated southern politics, are actively working through their networks to ensure that the TRT single candidates do not receive the minimum 20 percent. Songkhla Democrat MP Nipon Bunyamani said the Democrats were working throughout the South to have their supporters abstain when voting. In cases where a 3rd party candidate has managed to register the Democrats were organizing voters to vote for that candidate. Nipon was confident that their tactics, coupled with the ongoing protests in Bangkok, would force Thaksin to step down.

TRT CANDIDATES: KEEPING A LOW PROFILE, AVOIDING THAKSIN  
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15. (C) The election in the South is moving forward, but TRT candidates are keeping a low profile and avoiding public campaigning. TRT candidate Attacha Chaowawanit, running for a seat in Songkhla province, said he had to keep a very low profile in order to "avoid confrontations" with anti-Thaksin people and did not dare attempt a rally or public speech. His "campaign headquarters" had none of the usual signs or banners usually associated with a political campaign. Attacha was also quick to distance himself from Thaksin. "I am campaigning as an individual, not as a TRT member." Pattani TRT candidate Vairoj Phiphitpakdee was following the same course, noting that he and other TRT candidates did not want the Prime Minister to campaign for them, as it would only hurt their chances.

WOULD A CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT STOP THE VIOLENCE?  
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16. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin's "get tough" policies since 2001 and dismantling of the joint command structure in 2002

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are widely cited in the South as factors behind the increase in violence in this volatile region. Several of our interlocutors were cautiously optimistic that a change in administration might have a positive impact on the violence. Pattani Election Commission Padoongyot said most southerners believed that a change in government would improve the situation. Democrat MP Nipohn believed a new government would have the political flexibility to introduce necessary reforms for the South including more local control. "This as a critical time, a new government could allow us to turn things around in the South."

17. (C) Other contacts weren't as sanguine. Songkhla election commissioner Chawalit believed attacks would continue despite a change in government because, as he sees it, historic and cultural grievances were more central to the violence in the South than Thaksin missteps. "The Muslims consider themselves to be Malays, a change in government won't change a conflict between two cultures." Journalist Chaibong agreed, noting the local populations' larger dissatisfaction with and lingering resentment of the central government. Even if the Prime Minister stepped down he would likely be replaced by another TRT candidate who would be identified with Thaksin's policies.

MEANWHILE THE VIOLENCE CONTINUES: RED AREAS...  
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18. (C) The National Reconciliation Commission has postponed releasing its final report on root causes of the conflict in the far South until a new government is established. Meanwhile, violence continues at a steady pace. On March 16, militants, in an audacious daylight raid, assaulted a small district office in Pattani province with automatic weapons killing 6 local officials. Pattani based reporter Paret Lohansen told poloffs that the district chief had been targeted because he had been expanding the local village defense volunteer network. Reporters Paret and Chaibong said that the militants had been acting more boldly in recent weeks, pointing to several identifiable "red areas" in the

far South, especially in Narathiwat, where militants were acting more openly. Chaoyong claimed that Sungai Padi in Narathiwat, for example, had effectively become self-governing because Thai officials were afraid to go there.

...AND CONTINUED BUDDHIST FLIGHT  
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¶9. (C) Anecdotal reports of Buddhist departing the far South, especially Narathiwat and Yala provinces, were common among our interlocutors. TRT MP candidate Vairoj Phiphitpakdee, a lifelong resident of the South, noted that in the past militants had usually targeted government officials but were now just as likely to target Buddhist civilians. In his opinion, the goal of the militants was to make the southern 3 provinces an exclusively Muslim area. Journalist Chaoyong claimed that the government was manipulating official statistics in order to conceal the departure of Buddhists from Narathiwat and Yala. He claimed that local officials were refusing to register Buddhists when they moved out of the South.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) The very likely scenario is that TRT will not be able to win several single candidate races in across the South, thereby creating a situation where the full 500 seat parliament cannot be filled. The inaction of the election commissioners in Songkhla and Pattani in considering run-off scenarios reflects the larger paralysis of the Thai body politic. No one has a clear idea about how to break out of the current impasse. Like everyone else, the election commissioners appear to be waiting to see what happens after the April 2 election. Meanwhile, there is no end in sight to the violence afflicting the far South and opinion is divided on whether change in government might pave the way for a more successful policy. END COMMENT  
BOYCE